



Sheila Dixon

*Mayor,
Baltimore*

250 City Hall • Baltimore Maryland 21202
410-396-3835 • Fax: 410-576-9425

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CONTACT:

**Anthony McCarthy
(410) 869-6079 (Cell)**

Mayor Dixon Unveils New City Policy to Promote Better Access to Housing for Persons with Disabilities

Baltimore, MD (March 30, 2007) – Continuing her administration's commitment to better serve persons with disabilities, Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon announced a new City policy today that will coordinate and streamline all reasonable accommodation requests that are received by the Office of the Zoning Administrator from homes serving persons with disabilities. While the City has long been required to provide reasonable accommodations to homes serving persons with disabilities in order to give those persons an equal opportunity to live in dwellings of their choice, the City lacked a clear, written policy governing its practices. Failure to make reasonable accommodations is a violation of federal law: the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Fair Housing Act.

"We have a legal and moral responsibility to fully promote housing for persons with disabilities in Baltimore," said Mayor Dixon. "This new policy is the first of many changes my administration is considering to institutionalize practices that enhance economic development, owner investment, and access to housing for persons with disabilities."

The new policy provides clear standards and guidelines for requesting reasonable accommodations from the Office of the Zoning Administrator. In particular, it details how the office will evaluate reasonable accommodation requests from homes serving persons with disabilities to waive the Baltimore City Zoning Code's definition of "family". Absent a reasonable accommodation, the City's Zoning Code allows up to 4 unrelated persons to reside in a single-family dwelling. With an approved reasonable accommodation, that number could be exceeded.

"This policy makes a clear statement that Baltimore City is dedicated to improving the lives of people with disabilities," said Dr. Nollie P. Wood, Jr., Executive Director of the Mayor's Commission on Disabilities. "I applaud Mayor Dixon for recognizing that improving access for persons with disabilities and strengthening Baltimore's neighborhoods are not mutually exclusive goals."

Federal law provides that "persons with disabilities" are persons who: (1) have any physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; (2) have a record of having the impairment; or (3) are regarded by others as having the impairment.

“Local enforcement of our nation’s civil rights laws is an important issue in Baltimore, given the City’s history of struggle and activism,” said Lauren Young, Director of Litigation for the Maryland Disability Law Center. “This new policy advances civil rights and opens doors for persons with disabilities.”

The new policy also details the process for applying for a reasonable accommodation. The policy and application can be found online at *www.baltimorehousing.org* under “zoning”.

“We are pleased that the City has demonstrated its commitment to bringing its zoning policies into compliance with federal disability rights laws,” said Ellen Weber, Assistant Professor of Law and Director of the Drug Policy Clinic at the University of Maryland Law School. “Mayor Dixon should be congratulated for encouraging the availability of high quality, therapeutic housing solutions.”

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